

Selling out health? Vending machines force schools to make hard choices

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Tyler West is on a health kick.



Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

Students buy food from vending machines at Fort Herriman Middle School in Herriman.

The Calvin S. Smith Elementary sixth-grader and his friends spend recess time taking laps around the school yard. He hopes to rack up 180 miles this school year, under the elementary's goal to "walk" across the United States.

"I've set a goal for myself. It helps me be more fit and athletic," West said. "It's helped me with my food choices and stuff. It's also helped me with my stamina . . . it will also help me later on in my life."

But can West's zest make the leap to junior high?

Pediatricians, education officials, even the PTA worry.

Because in junior high, chances are apples and oranges at the lunch counter will compete with hallway vending machines stocked with candy, chips and pop — which the American Academy of Pediatrics links to increased risk of childhood obesity, dubbed "the most common medical condition of childhood."

But for principals, vending machines are golden handcuffs in a state with the lowest per-pupil funding the country. Student programs in Granite District, for instance, are supported by a 10-year, \$2.5 million Pepsi contract.

"If I had my choice, I probably wouldn't have any vending machines in the school . . . particularly now with issues of childhood obesity," said Mike Sirois, principal of Jordan District's Fort Herriman Middle School, which opened this year with a soda-vending ban. "Educators just get placed between a rock and a hard place. . . . A lot of the stuff we do for (students) actually gets funded by those machines." Still, education officials believe changes are in store, resulting from societal pressures — and a recent act of Congress.

Fighting obesity

One-fourth of all Utah kindergartners through eighth-graders are at an unhealthy weight, and almost 12 percent weigh in as "obese," according to a 2003 state health

department study.



Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

Second-graders at Calvin S. Smith Elementary start day with a walk.

Schools are trying to combat the problem.

Calvin S. Smith Elementary, like schools in three-fourths of Utah school districts according to a spring report, is a Gold Medal School. The program comes through the Utah Department of Health and promotes nutrition and physical activity.

Smith students have expanded playground activities; the second-graders walk every morning as a group. Principal Marilyn Laughlin says bullying is down, students participate more in playground activities and seem to be doing better all around.

But some child-health advocates believe schools can do more.

They say schools shouldn't sell junk in vending machines, which have become a mainstay of secondary schools.

"They certainly are . . . contributing to the obesity epidemic," said Salt Lake pediatrician Mark Templeman. "The school districts . . . are making money on the waistlines of our children."

The Utah PTA and American Academy of Pediatrics have OK'd resolutions and policy statements, respectively, decrying junk food in school vending machines, and encouraging school leaders to consider changing vended fare.

Even the American Beverage Association last August recommended limiting soft drink availability in schools nationwide.

"The school environment should be consistent with the core curriculum objectives that teach and support healthy nutritional lifestyles and consumer practices," the 2000 Utah PTA resolution states.

Big bucks at stake

But money is in the balance. And Utah educators say schools can't afford to lose a cent.

East High School's Coke contract brought in \$10,000 up front the first year, according to documents provided by Salt Lake City School District. The school also gets more than \$6 per every case of soda sold in the first two years of the 2003-06 agreement, plus 30 percent sales commission, 150 Coca-Cola school calendars, and no fewer than 12 vending machines.

Highland High's Pepsi perks include a \$1,000 annual student scholarship, Gatorade for

athletes and \$450 in restaurant gift certificates for employee recognition.

In Granite District's Pepsi contract, money goes to schools on a per-pupil basis, and can be spent only on books, athletic programs, school plays and activities and other items benefiting students.

"It's a substantial portion of the reason schools are able to offer those programs," spokesman Randy Ripplinger said of the money.

But Templeman believes there's a better way, that won't put schools in a financial lurch.

Templeman is talking with House Speaker Greg Curtis, R-Sandy, about giving school districts incentives to cut ties with soda companies, mainly by replacing the money they get from pop companies with state funds. He plans, with Curtis, to address the Granite Board of Education about the idea next month.

"I don't think there should be vending machines in our junior highs or elementaries," Rep. Curtis said. "But it's a local issue. We ought to try and incentivize them. I know they're cash-strapped. . . . (But) we think the better policy is, students ought to be eating healthier food."

Wasatch takes lead

Wasatch School District does too.

Its 2004 nutrition policy requires 70 percent of school vending machine offerings to be water, milk, 100 percent fruit juices and foods meeting district minimum nutritional standards.

The school district reimburses schools for profits lost under the policy.

And it's had to pony up.

Wasatch Mountain Junior High principal Dennis Bacon reports vending machine revenues decreased 7 percent when the policy premiered last school year. That's about \$500 in the 600-student school.

But the reasons are not simple.

Bacon reports vending machine profits were declining in pre-policy years. The junior high in 2000 took in \$12,000 in vending profits, Bacon said. That has steadily declined to \$7,000 taken in last year.

The school changed from a three-year to a two-year school in the same time period, possibly affecting revenues.

Students districtwide also are buying healthier fare.

"We sold more milk last year than pop," said Darren Wilkins, Wasatch District food services director. "But there's less of a profit margin in it."

Increased costs also have somewhat drained soft-drink profits, too, Bacon notes.

Still, the bottom line might be worth the bigger perk: Health.

"The side effect of the whole thing: It really increased lunch participation," Wilkins said. "Kids are getting a more healthy meal. They're not buying candy and soda out of the drink machines. That's what we want to see."

Wasatch High School is serving four times as many students as it did in pre-nutrition policy years, Wilkins said. Its kitchen, once open part-time operation, now is a full-time shop offering fare like popcorn shrimp — baked, not fried.

Still, it's difficult to say if students are changing their sweet-toothed ways.

While drink machines only offer 30 percent soda pop, "we do have to restock (soda) quite a bit," Bacon said.

"But certainly, the perception schools are trying to address this is out there," Bacon

said. "And that is very powerful."

Push from Congress

Several schools are offering nutritional snacks, water, and diary products in their vending machines.

Sirois just had vending machines put in the newly opened Fort Herriman. But they don't sell pop.

South Davis Junior High principal Bryon Nielsen says he just got rid of all six vending machines there. "The nutritional value is poor. We make plenty of money on our student store."

More changes could be on their way, under an act of Congress.

By June, the federal child nutrition reauthorization act requires all school districts to have a wellness policy addressing vending machines, nutrition education and related matters, said Jodi Vlam, Murray School District's food service director.

"Depending on how well districts take this wellness policy to heart . . . it could be the driving force to perhaps make some changes," particularly in giving high-school students more time and seating to eat so they don't turn to vending machine snacks instead, Vlam said.

Money matters also might change things in Davis County.

Davis School District this summer decided to charge schools for vending machines, which spokesman Chris Williams says drain district coffers by \$100,000 a year in power costs.

Schools now must pay \$15 a month for drink machines that turn off when not in use, and \$25 a month for those that don't. Snack vending machines will be assessed a \$5 a month fee.

"The district just couldn't afford to subsidize the profits the schools were making," Williams said.